

The Guardian



Colin Jackson: phenomenal athlete who came out at 50

His 110m hurdles world record stood for a decade but only Jackson knows why saying he was gay took so long

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Colin Jackson has been in the public eye since his teenage years, when a phenomenal athletic prowess was first identified at Birchgrove Harriers, the club nearest his home on the outskirts of Cardiff.

The former 110m hurdles world record holder has been clearing barriers with rare skill ever since but revealing his sexuality to the world earlier this week was an obstacle sized up more carefully than ever.

The Swedish LGBT former athletes Kajsa Bergqvist and Peter Häggström, who interviewed Jackson, were not the first to ask. In fact, Jackson - now a BBC pundit and presenter - had twice publicly denied he was gay: in a 2004 autobiography and a 2008 newspaper interview.

But he said the circumstances felt right to come out aged 50 in a TV interview, more than a decade since a tabloid kiss-and-tell forced him to reveal the fact to his parents.

Jackson was born in 1967, the same year male homosexuality was partially decriminalised in the UK. But while he was competing at the top level, few sportsmen felt confident enough to come out. Jackson's elite career overlapped with that of Justin Fashanu, the first openly gay footballer, who took his own life in 1998, eight years after revealing his homosexuality.

But when approached by the programme *Rainbow Heroes*, which airs on SVT in Sweden, Jackson became convinced his news would not be "sensationalised" as he had once feared.

"The way you asked me, it was a whole storytelling kind of thing," he told Bergqvist, a former high jumper. "You were just interested in the way it affected me sports-wise, emotionally-wise and my preparation."

There had been speculation about Jackson's sexuality, which intensified in 2006 when the *News of the World* published a story in which a gay male air steward claimed to have had a secret affair with him.

It prompted Jackson to come out to his parents. "I was waiting for them in the kitchen," he said. "They walked in and they sat down. My mother could see my face and I was quite distraught. It didn't faze them at all.

"My mum went: 'First of all, is the story true?' I said it's true, so it's not like I can deny it. And then she went: 'Well, why are people so disgraceful?' I just realised, I've got the best parents."

While he possessed bags of natural talent, Jackson has always maintained it was a formidable work ethic instilled by his parents, first generation Jamaican immigrants, that marked him out for greatness.

His mum, Angela, arrived in Cardiff in 1955 and his dad, Ossie, in 1962 and the pair married later that year. A conservative couple, they were very popular on the council estate where Jackson and his sister, the actor Suzanne Packer - once a regular on *Casualty* - were raised. Angela was a midwife and later a theatre sister while Ossie worked in sales for an air-conditioning company.

When featured in the BBC genealogy programme *Who Do You Think You Are?* in 2009, Jackson discovered he was descended from Taino Indians, the native inhabitants of Jamaica. They later mixed with escaped slaves and formed their own Maroon communities, who fought against slavery and for Jamaican independence in the 17th century.

"The fieriness that the Maroons had, first with their fight with the Spanish and then the English, I think I've got that in me now," said Jackson. "Because when I lined up on many occasions to compete for Great Britain, it took a lot of heart and soul to get out there and to really be at war with my competitors."

In his early years, Jackson primarily identified as Jamaican and family meals were saltfish, rice and peas, and jerk chicken. It was not until he got his first Welsh vest aged 14 that he felt properly British.

Ask any of his former teammates what made Jackson a world record holder and they will point to a ferocious determination. He seemed to possess an invisible switch that turned him from happy-go-lucky off the track to ruthless on it. His close relationship with coach Malcolm Arnold, who he joined at 17 and remained with until retirement in 2003, was also a big factor.

“His natural strengths were his perception and understanding of the training process, his ability to work hard, his natural psychological strength and an excellent basic speed,” said Arnold.

“He was very good at jumping, throwing and running events and there was some discussion when he was a junior about doing the decathlon or becoming a long jumper.

“However, when he became world junior champion in Athens and ran 13.44 sec, it was obvious that his future lay in hurdling.”

His parents remained unconvinced about athletics as a career choice until Jackson won silver at the 1986 Commonwealth Games - his first major senior medal - when he was just 19. Success soon brought riches Jackson had barely dreamed of. Three years after leaving school he was driving past his old teachers in a Mercedes.

He went undefeated at the European championships for 12 years in a row but Jackson's piece de resistance remains a 12.91 seconds 110m hurdles world record, which stood for more than a decade. He remains the 60m hurdles world record holder.

The missing element of Jackson's career and the reason he is underrated in some quarters is the lack of an Olympic title. He won silver in Seoul in 1988 and was favourite to win gold in Barcelona four years later.

But, inhibited by a rib cartilage injury, Jackson - usually clean as a whistle - hit four hurdles in the final and staggered over the line in seventh place. His training partner, the Canadian Mark McKoy, who together with his wife and baby daughter had stayed in Jackson's home in Cardiff in the run-up to the Olympics, won gold.

Jackson has spoken at length of his devastation at missing out. “At first I thought, ‘That was such a shit race, can we do it again?’” he said. “The second thought was, ‘At least Mark won.’

“But that didn't make things easier to live with. I saw Mark every day and it was the most horrible thing to know he had won and I hadn't.”

In Atlanta in 1996, Jackson was again thwarted in his search of that elusive Olympic gold, pulling a muscle in the final of the 110m hurdles and missing out on a bronze medal by 0.02sec.

His former teammate Iwan Thomas maintains that Jackson's legacy is unaffected by the absence of an Olympic title. “He might be a bit underrated because he never won the Olympics,” said Thomas. “But the stopwatch doesn't lie, his world record was one of the longest standing in athletics and he was the ultimate professional.”

By 2004, when Jackson's outdoor world record was broken by the Chinese athlete Liu Xiang at the Athens Olympics, Jackson was watching from the BBC studio. He has covered most major athletics events since for the corporation and appeared on Strictly Come Dancing in 2005.

He said getting a job with the BBC helped him deal with the anxiety attacks that accompanied the end of his athletics career.

“When you spend all of your adult life doing something and suddenly that stops, you think: how am I going to earn money? How am I going to live?” he told the Big Issue in 2014.

Jackson also revealed he had struggled with an eating disorder as he battled to lose weight to give himself a competitive edge early in his career.

Friends suggest that he was not ready to come out in 2008 when asked by the Voice, Britain's biggest black newspaper, how he felt about people thinking he is gay.

"I don't mind having people say what they like in that circumstance," he said at the time. "I know that I am not but I don't think it's for me to be going round screaming it from the rooftops. I think it's just rubbish. It makes no real sense to me."

Fellow Welsh athlete Iwan Thomas, who first met Jackson at the Commonwealth Games in 1994, hailed Jackson's decision to come out.

"I've always thought of him as an absolute superstar but I think the perception of him is even greater now," he said. "I think it's very different nowadays to 20 years ago where it might have been frowned upon."

"I hope by Colin coming out it might give people in sport in particular the courage to do the same because sport can be quite a difficult place and very judgmental."

"Only Colin knows but maybe that's why he left it so long. I'm going to give him a big hug when I see him because if even one person feels they can come out to their mum or dad because they've seen what Colin's done then that's amazing."

Potted profile

Age: 50

Career: Jackson claimed his first senior medal at the Commonwealth Games in 1986, a silver in the 110m hurdles. A silver medal at the Seoul Olympics followed and he went unbeaten at the European Championships for 12 years. He set a world record to win gold at the Stuttgart World Championships in 1993 and won the world title again in 1999. He retired in 2003 after finishing fifth at the World Indoor Championships in Birmingham, the 71st appearance for Britain in his career. He has been a BBC athletics pundit and presenter since retirement.

High point: Gold medal at the World Championships in Stuttgart in 1993 in 12.91sec, a world record which stood for more than a decade.

Low point: Missing out on a medal when favourite to win gold at the Barcelona Olympics in 1992.

He says: "I never look for the highs that I had in that cauldron because I don't think you get them on the outside - you can never repeat that. Can you imagine being the best in the world? Whatever you do, you are the best hurdler on the planet at that particular moment - you cannot repeat that. Entrepreneurs - can they really say they're the best the world? I really appreciate having been able to say that."

They say: "His natural strengths were his perception and understanding of the training process, his natural psychological strength and an excellent basic speed" - coach Malcolm Arnold.

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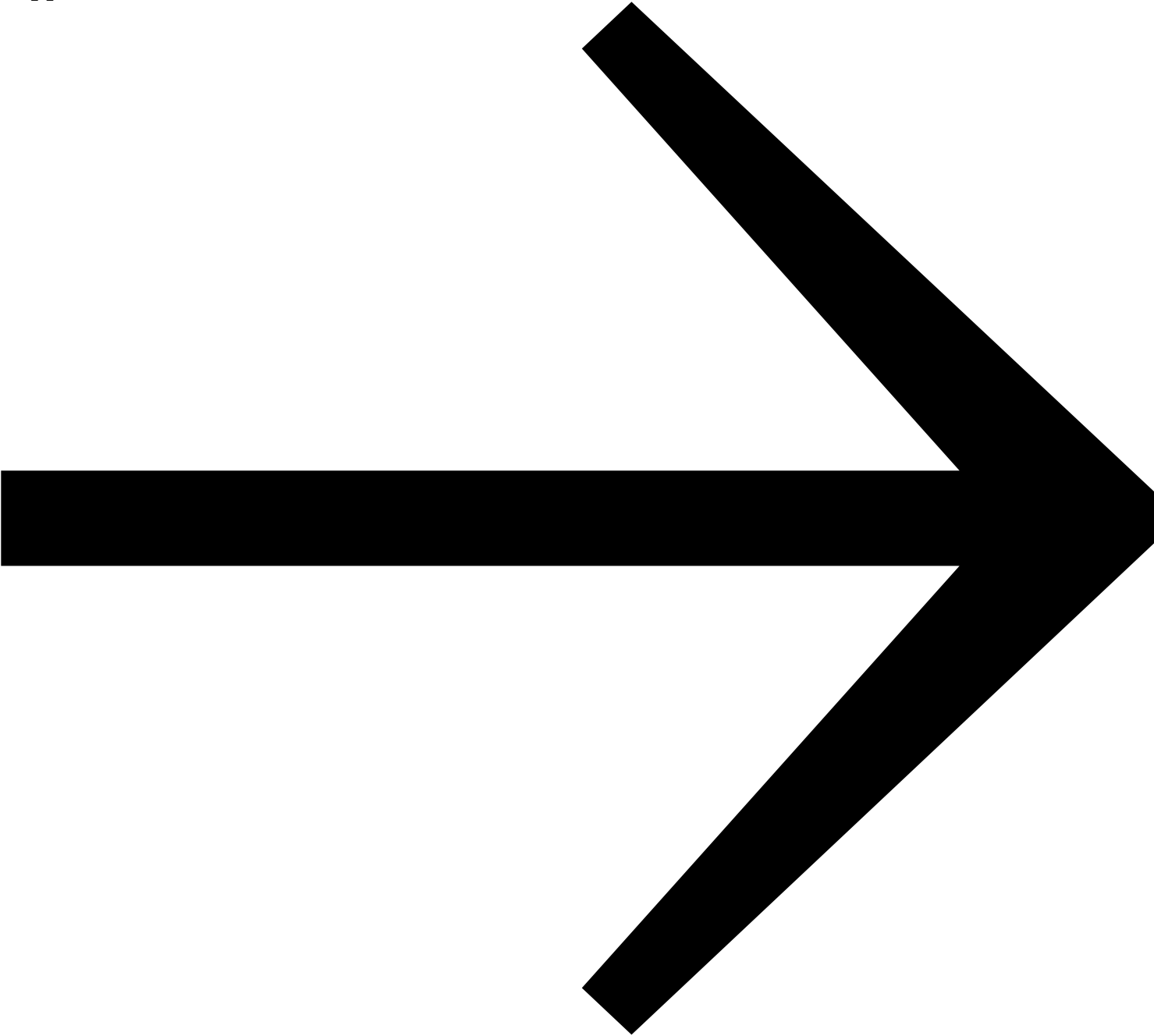
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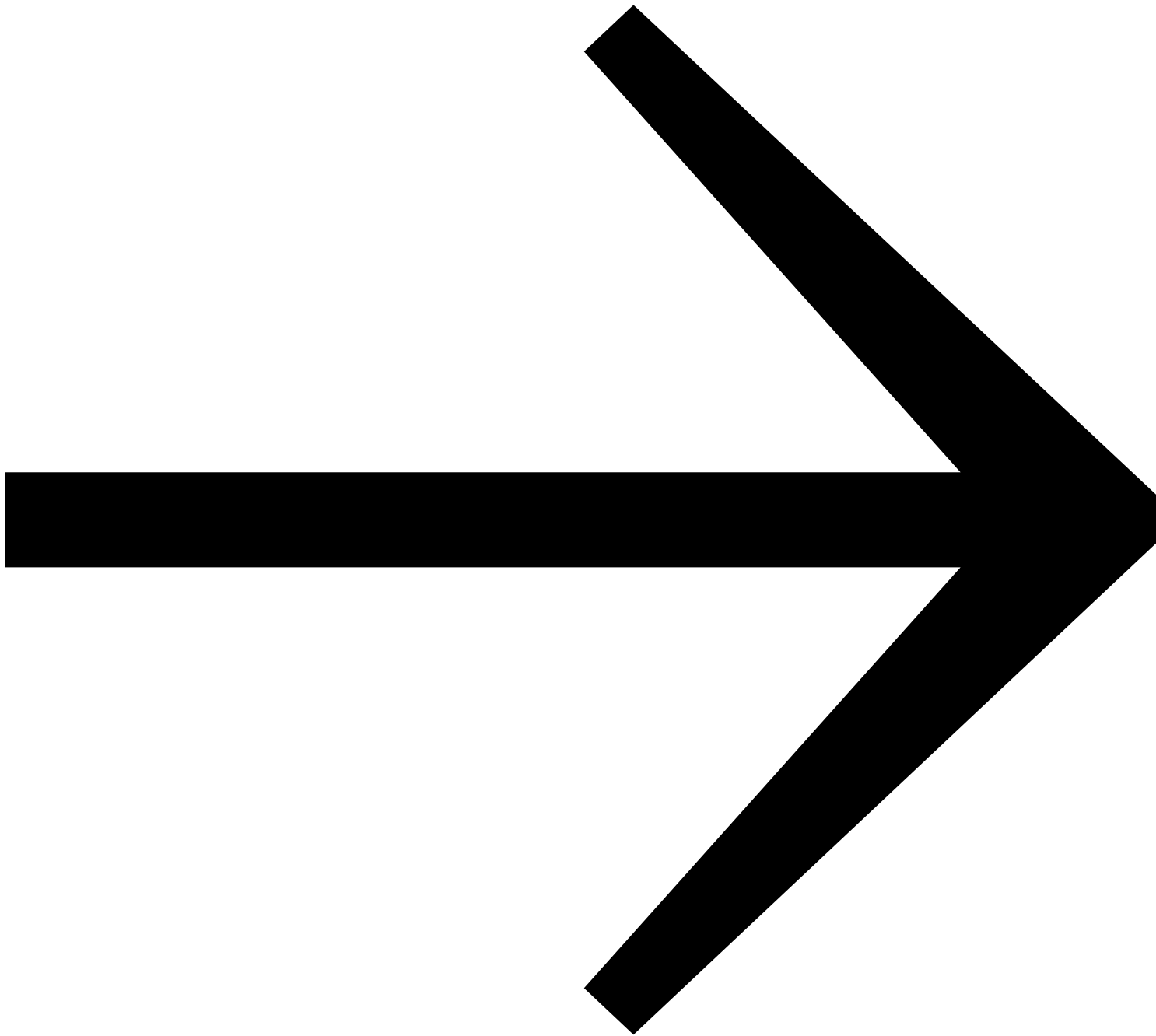
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